

CLARK ART INSTITUTE OPENS LIN MAY SAEED'S FIRST SOLO MUSEUM EXHIBITION

Arrival of the Animals opens July 21 and looks at human-animal relations

(July 8, 2020)—The Clark Art Institute opens *Lin May Saeed: Arrival of the Animals*, the artist's first solo museum show, on July 21. On view through October 25, the exhibition presents a career-spanning selection of more than twenty objects by Saeed in two and three dimensions, encompassing a range of materials, such as Styrofoam, paper, and steel. These include several large-format, site-specific works created for the exhibition, which is being presented in the Clark's Lunder Center galleries at Stone Hill and on the Moltz Terrace adjoining the galleries.

For the last fifteen years, Lin May Saeed (b. 1973, Germany) has focused on the lives of animals and human-animal relations. With empathy and wit, she tells stories—both ancient and modern—of animal subjugation, liberation, and cohabitation with humans, working toward a new iconography of interspecies solidarity.

For Saeed, animals have arrived in the moral consciousness of many at the very moment of their mass extinction. The animals in her work frequently arrive to reoccupy spaces that were once theirs; in other words, they return. To imagine these worlds, Saeed often combines traditional artistic forms, such as the sculptural relief, with nontraditional materials, like expanded polystyrene foam, better known as Styrofoam. This petroleum-based, non-biodegradable plastic is easy for the artist to find, usually secondhand, and to work, without assistance. For Saeed, Styrofoam is a reminder of humans' environmental impact and a material ripe for transformation.

"Lin May Saeed's work is intriguing, challenging, and highly relevant, and we believe it will appeal to viewers on multiple levels," said Olivier Meslay, Hardymon Director of the Clark Art Institute. "Working with unusual materials, Saeed creates objects that are both strange and strong, and produces effects that are at once powerful and poignant."

The exhibition's subtitle is borrowed from a short story of the same name by the author Elias Canetti. Saeed, whose roots are German-Jewish and Iraqi, admires Canetti for exposing power structures both within and between species and observing the perils of animalizing humans.

"Lin May Saeed is overdue for a career-spanning solo exhibition," said Robert Wiesenberger, associate curator of contemporary projects at the Clark. "Her quiet, committed practice is by turns trenchant and darkly funny—and in any case, timely. Amidst overlapping environmental, public health, and human rights crises, her work suggests the ways these relate. At the end of 2019, for example, she began a new sculpture of a pangolin for the Clark exhibition in which the scaly animal appears to

have liberated itself from its shipping crate, which it treats as a plinth. Just a few months later, an op-ed article about COVID-19 appeared in *The New York Times* under the headline, ‘Revenge of the Pangolins?’ It’s a title Saeed could have written.

“When visitors encounter Saeed’s work at the Clark,” Wiesenberger added, “it will be in a broader art historical context—exploring animals, animality, and otherness—and in the Clark’s woodsy locale, teeming with its own wildlife.”

ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

Arrival of the Animals starts and ends in caves—one of the past, the other of the future. The first contains a selection of prints and drawings from the Clark’s collection, selected in collaboration with the artist, and spanning four centuries of art history. These works figure animals as curiosities and nemeses, metaphors and muses, objects and subjects. The exhibition concludes with a cave that houses *Seven Sleepers* (2020), Saeed’s largest sculpture group to date.

Saeed is inspired by the low relief sculptures of ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, a region that includes much of present-day Iraq. The artist’s father emigrated from Iraq to Germany in the 1960s; intent on assimilation, he did not speak Arabic in the house, but Saeed is teaching herself the language today. Arabic has appeared in her artwork for some time—at first as purely formal marks, some of them invented, and later in careful transcription, as in *Mureen/Lion School* (2016), in which one lion imparts a poetic message to another. Four of Saeed’s large Styrofoam reliefs are represented in the exhibition—each of them carved deeply, embellished with additional elements on its surface, and finished with colorful washes of acrylic paint.

Drawing is important for Saeed, both in planning new work and as a free-standing practice. Her drawings in the exhibition present narratives in which animals figure centrally and reveal the artist’s wry and occasionally dark sense of humor about the folly of human-centered thinking. *Noel* (2019), for example, retells a familiar tale set in a manger, but with a different focus: the donkey in the foreground munches away at a historic moment, not necessarily oblivious but certainly not captivated either. In *Doha* (2019), a camel regards the viewer, perhaps with a mischievous look, as the glass towers of the Qatari financial hub burn in the background. *Hathor* (2019) presents an animal of Saeed’s own imagining, a gentle herbivore whose club-like crest can—in cases of self-defense—do considerable damage.

Since 2007, Saeed has created what she calls “silhouettes,” mural-like works made of transparent paper that are suspended and backlit on the wall. She sees this format as reminiscent of the woodcuts and cut-paper film animation of early twentieth-century Germany. For *Arrival of the Animals*, Saeed created *Hawr al-Hammar/Hammar Marshes* (2020), a wall-size silhouette (approximately 8.5 x 17 feet) depicting the Hammar Marshes of Iraq, a site long thought to be a model for the Garden of Eden, in part due to its spectacular biodiversity. In the 1990s, the marshes were drained by Saddam Hussein, allegedly to expose Shia rebels. A civil

engineering project helped restore them, but they are now at risk of drying up again due to growing cities bordering Iraq and drought brought on by a warming planet. Still, for Saeed, the idea of a modern-day Eden in a war-torn country represents a small pocket of Utopia in the present.

Saeed also “draws” in steel. *Arrival of the Animals* includes three of the artist’s “gates,” adult human-sized panels created by bending and welding steel rods into cartoonish contours inside a rectangular frame, to which hinges and a handle are attached. The gate, for her, suggests both enclosure and an opening toward utopian possibility. *St. Jerome and the Lion* (2016) implies a new twist on the story of the Christian priest and scholar who generously removed a thorn from an ailing lion’s paw, thereby gaining him as a companion for life. Another gate, *The Liberation of Animals from their Cages XXIII / Djamil Gate* (2020), introduces the theme of animal liberation persistent in Saeed’s work.

Though Saeed has long been dedicated to animal rights, the idea of animal liberation, first popularized by Peter Singer’s 1975 book of the same name, gave her a concrete narrative to depict in her sculpture. In *The Liberation of Animals from their Cages* series, life-size figures stand atop shipping crates, their cages serving as plinths. From this series, *Arrival of the Animals* presents *Calf* (2018) and a new work, *Pangolin* (2020). Native to Asia and Africa, pangolins are the world’s most trafficked mammal, their scales and meat prized for medicinal and culinary purposes. They have also recently made headlines as possible hosts of COVID-19, a zoonotic disease, or one transmitted via animals, usually in the process of their slaughter, sale, or consumption. Saeed’s sculpture, begun at the end of 2019, thus anticipates yet another dimension of the human-animal relationship.

The exhibition ends with *Seven Sleepers* (2020), an installation created for *Arrival of the Animals*. This sculpture group—Saeed’s largest to date—revisits the titular legend, which exists in both medieval Christian tradition and the Islamic Qur’an. In it, a group of young Christians in the third century CE, persecuted by the Roman emperor Decius, retreats to a cave for protection. They pray fervently before falling asleep for what becomes a three-hundred-year slumber. Upon waking, they emerge from the cave into an emancipated world in which their faith has become the state religion. Depending upon the teller of this story, the men are either guarded by a dog at the cave’s mouth or joined by one in its interior. Saeed first learned of the story when visiting family in Amman, Jordan, home to one of a few caves that claims to have hosted the Seven Sleepers. She was struck by the story as both trans-religious and interspecies. Sleep, for Saeed, is a fascinating theme: it refuses the logic of productivity, opens onto the strangeness of dreams, and, eventually, yields to reawakening.

Lin May Saeed: Arrival of the Animals is accompanied by the artist’s first monograph, published by the Clark, and distributed by Yale University Press. In addition to studio and installation photography, it includes interpretive essays by Wiesenberger and by Mel Y. Chen, associate professor of Gender & Women’s Studies at the University of

California, Berkeley. It also includes Saeed's own fable-like fictional writings and a previously untranslated text by the late German sociologist Birgit Mütterich, on animality and otherness.

***Lin May Saeed: Arrival of the Animals* is organized by the Clark Art Institute and curated by Robert Wiesenberger, associate curator of contemporary projects. Lin May Saeed's work is courtesy of the artist; Jacky Strenz, Frankfurt; and Nicolas Krupp, Basel. Major support for the exhibition is provided by Denise Littlefield Sobel. Additional funding is generously provided by Katherine and Frank Martucci.**

ABOUT LIN MAY SAEED

Lin May Saeed (b. 1973, Würzburg, Germany) is a German-Iraqi artist who lives and works in Berlin. She has been the subject of recent solo exhibitions at What Pipeline, Detroit (2019); Studio Voltaire, London (2018); and Lulu, Mexico City (2017). She has recently appeared in group exhibitions at Air de Paris, Romainville, France (2020); Palais de Tokyo, Paris; the Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic Arts, Slovenia; and Villa Merkel, Esslingen, Germany (all 2019); Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt; mumok, museum moderner kunst, Vienna; and Museo Castello di Rivoli, Turin (all 2018); and KölnSkulptur, Cologne (2017). Forthcoming exhibitions will appear at Jacky Strenz, Frankfurt (2021); Museo Castello di Rivoli, Turin (2021); and Fondation Carmignac, Porquerolles, France (2021). Since 2006, Lin May Saeed has been represented by Jacky Strenz, Frankfurt.

ABOUT THE CLARK

The Clark Art Institute, located in the Berkshires of western Massachusetts, is one of a small number of institutions globally that is both an art museum and a center for research, critical discussion, and higher education in the visual arts. Opened in 1955, the Clark houses exceptional European and American paintings and sculpture, extensive collections of master prints and drawings, English silver, and early photography. Acting as convener through its Research and Academic Program, the Clark gathers an international community of scholars to participate in a lively program of conferences, colloquia, and workshops on topics of vital importance to the visual arts. The Clark library, consisting of more than 275,000 volumes, is one of the nation's premier art history libraries. The Clark also houses and co-sponsors the Williams College Graduate Program in the History of Art.

The Clark, which has a three-star rating in the Michelin Green Guide, is located at 225 South Street in Williamstown, Massachusetts. Its 140-acre campus includes miles of hiking and walking trails through woodlands and meadows, providing an exceptional experience of art in nature. Galleries are open Tuesday through Sunday, 10 am to 5 pm. Admission is \$20; free year-round for Clark members, children 18 and younger, and students with valid ID. Free admission is available through several programs, including First Sundays Free; a local library pass program; and EBT Card

to Culture. For more information on these programs and more, visit clarkart.edu or call 413 458 2303.

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